

Analysis

Can Russia's Opposition Liberals Come to Power?

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Abstract

Theoretically, Russia's opposition liberals could come to power through elections or cooperating with the incumbent authorities. Currently, liberals have little leverage in the elite battles taking place at the top of Russian politics. The only elections with some competition left are at the local level and Boris Nemtsov produced a respectable showing in the April Sochi mayoral elections, though the regime is still able to squash any conceivable opposition. Pursuing an alternative strategy, Nikita Belykh recently accepted an appointment as Kirov governor and is trying to show that his liberal ideology will work in practice, even in extremely unfavorable conditions. While the Yabloko party continues to exist under new leadership, it has not found a strong place under contemporary conditions. Although the liberals have little chance of coming to power at the federal level today, they are building experience in campaigning and governing that could be useful if an opportunity opens in the future.

Two Paths to Power

There are two ways that Russia's opposition liberals could conceivably come to power in contemporary Russia: elections or cooperation with the Putin regime. With elections, a liberal candidate and party would compete with other parties and win popular support. By working with the Putin regime, opposition liberals could cooperate with the current authorities to advance their ideological goals. The following article will examine the chances for these two paths.

In this context, liberals are individuals and parties that support a coherent ideology which includes support for a democratic form of government (free elections, free press, a meaningful legislature, independent judges) and a relatively circumscribed role for the state in the economy. In post-Soviet Russia, a variety of groups have expressed this ideology, including Democratic Russia, Yabloko, Russia's Democratic Choice, Union of Right Forces, and, most recently, Solidarity. Yegor Gaidar's government in 1991–1992 marked the height of liberal power in Russia. Liberal parties had representation in the State Duma until the December 2003 elections, when both the Union of Right Forces and Yabloko failed to cross the 5 percent barrier. With the 2007 elections, held under strict proportional representation rules that allowed in only parties that won more than 7 percent of the vote, the few prominent liberal individuals remaining in the lower house of the legislature lost their seats.

Olympic Electoral Efforts

While national elections provide few opportunities for opposition parties to win political representation, mayoral elections have offered alternative candidates

a chance to present their views and challenge incumbents. Boris Nemtsov, one of the leaders of the newly formed Solidarity opposition movement, saw the April 26 elections in Sochi as an opportunity to boost the profile of his movement and test the potential for liberal views in Russia.

Sochi will host the winter Olympics in 2014 so the mayor of the city will be a figure of national and international prominence. Seeking to win an election there for an opposition candidate like Nemtsov was a highly visible test since Putin takes a strong personal interest in the progress of Olympic preparations and would not want to have someone he did not control in the position of mayor. Ultimately, Nemtsov won just 13.5 percent of the vote and did not pose a serious threat to the authorities' chosen candidate who won 77 percent. The Communist Party candidate won a meager 7 percent, in an election in which 39 percent of the eligible voters participated. Immediately following the election, Nemtsov claimed that his exit polls showed him winning as much as 35 percent of the vote and he has filed a legal case arguing that the authorities engaged in massive falsifications.

Interpreting the significance of Nemtsov's official numbers is difficult. On one hand, he did not come close to beating the incumbent. However, a second place showing of 13.5 percent suggests that the liberal cause is in better shape than it has been in recent years. In the 2007 State Duma elections, the liberal parties combined won only 2.6 percent of the vote. If Nemtsov can build a national coalition that would bring him to 13.5 percent of the vote at the national level, he would dramatically improve the recent performance of co-believers.

It is not clear that Nemtsov could do on the national level what he accomplished in Sochi. The dominant figure in Sochi is the governor of Krasnodar Krai Aleksandr Tkachev. Although technically serving at the will of the Russian president, Tkachev maintains Moscow's support by holding his region in a tight vice. As governor, he controls all the mayors working in his region and their "elections" simply ratify decisions that he made long in advance. Sochi held elections now because the governor had won the appointment of a previous Sochi mayor as head of Olimpstroj, the state corporation in charge of Olympic preparations. Tkachev apparently was not happy with two subsequent individuals who sat in the mayor's chair and finally settled on Anatoly Pakhomov as the best man for the job. To secure Pakhomov's victory, the authorities used every dirty trick in the book: first registering a porn star, ballerina, and oligarch to turn the election into a circus, then removing them when they seemed likely to damage Pakhomov's chances of winning more than 50 percent in the first round and avoiding a runoff. They apparently calculated that removing Nemtsov from the race would cause them too much embarrassment, so they let him compete. Nevertheless, the local authorities held tight control over the media, using it to build up acting Mayor Pakhomov's image as a pragmatic leader who gets things down, while regularly attacking Nemtsov, accusing him, for example, of "selling the Olympics to the Koreans" and "working for the Americans."

Cut off from media access and up against municipal leaders bent on using every conceivable resource against him, Nemtsov built his campaign on grassroots organizing. He spent the weeks before the election running around the city trying to meet with as many voters as possible face-to-face and convincing them to vote for him, as documented in Campaign Manager Ilya Yashin's blog (<http://yashin.livejournal.com/>). In addition, Nemtsov set himself up as the defender of ordinary Sochi residents who saw themselves as victims of the Olympic construction plans. Preparing for the 2014 games requires extensive infrastructure construction, which will force many people out of their homes. Numerous property owners do not want to move and feel that they are not being offered sufficient compensation, creating considerable discontent. Nemtsov was able to tap into these concrete concerns and present himself as a defender of popular interests in the face of an indifferent government.

Whether Nemtsov and his allies will be able to apply similar tactics at the national level remains an open question. With federal media under strict control, the liber-

als will have to find a different way to get their message out. Meeting with people face-to-face will not be as easy at the national level in a country as large as Russia as it was in a city like Sochi. Additionally, it may be harder for the liberals to find a concrete cause at the national level as the Olympics provided in Sochi. Accordingly, it is by no means easy to extrapolate Nemtsov's Sochi results to the federal level.

Cooperating with the Authorities?

The key question for Russia's liberal opposition groups is whether or not they should cooperate with the Putin regime. This question has long divided members of the movement. In the first part of Putin's presidency, the liberals generally supported him, but now the movement is much more divided. Supporters of working with the authorities point out that doing so gives liberals access to real power, including chances to win Russian elections, and makes it possible for them to influence policies. Opponents protest that subordinating themselves to the will of the Kremlin causes them to give up their identity, blocking them from achieving substantive gains on core matters such as promoting democracy and competitive markets.

After its disastrous showing in the 2007 State Duma elections, the Union of Right Forces, once a key leader of the liberal movement, officially disbanded and broke into three different camps. Nemtsov and colleagues like chess champion Garri Kasparov, human rights activist Lev Ponomarev and former Deputy Energy Minister Vladimir Milov set up Solidarity in October 2008 as a party in opposition to Russia's authoritarian regime (<http://www.rusolidarnost.ru/>). The group seeks to organize mass activities in order to pressure the authorities to take real steps toward the democratization of the country. It is working for free and fair parliamentary elections in which all sides have equal access to the media. The group's program "300 Steps to Freedom" proposes 300 concrete measures that should be adopted to advance liberal goals. Overall, the program seeks to establish greater competition in Russia's political and economic life.

Another fragment of the SPS joined with two smaller parties to form Right Cause (*Pravoe delo*, <http://www.pravoedelo.ru/>). This organization, headed by former acting SPS leader Leonid Gozman, journalist Georgii Bovt, and Business Russia Chairman Boris Titov, is closely associated with the Kremlin and is basically an attempt by the authorities to bring right-wing voters into a group that they can easily control, while siphoning off potential support from authentic opposition groups like

Solidarity. Gozman justified establishing a new “liberal” party under Kremlin auspices by commenting that “it is impossible to create a party without cooperating with the authorities under the existing totalitarian regime.” The party’s compromises with Russia’s rulers are obvious in its slogan “freedom, property, order.” The purpose of *Pravoe delo* is to bring the right into the political mainstream, according to a 2009 history of the Union of Right Forces written by the Kirill Benediktov (<http://red-viper.livejournal.com/54915.html>). This book, published under the general editorship of pro-Kremlin spin doctor Gleb Pavlovsky, seems to be, among other things, a sophisticated attempt to make *Pravoe delo* appear to be more important than it actually is, though the author admits that the party has little chance of winning over Russian business, which is now focused on courting the pro-Kremlin United Russia since it sees that party as providing more reliable access to the corridors of power.

Former SPS Chairman Nikita Belykh (<http://belyh.livejournal.com/>) chose a different route. After the breakup of the Union of Right Forces, Belykh declared that he would not join the newly-created Right Cause because he did not want to participate in a “Kremlin project.” He also came into conflict with Solidarity leader Kasparov. Instead of continuing to work within these various party organizations, Belykh accepted the surprising offer from President Medvedev to become governor of Kirov Oblast, one of the poorest regions in Russia, which is facing particularly intractable problems during times of general economic crisis. Naturally, many of his party colleagues considered Belykh’s decision to accept the governorship a sell-out to the authorities, but he claimed that he was not giving up his convictions and that he would put his skills to work addressing practical issues.

Like Nemtsov’s effort to win an election in a city where Putin has a personal stake, Belykh is seeking to prove himself in a job where he has little chance of success. Nevertheless, if Belykh, who is just 33, can prove himself in Kirov, it may open doors for him at the federal level and pave the way for more liberal politicians to gain more important positions. During his first months in office, Belykh has sought to improve business conditions, cut the size of the bureaucracy at the regional level, fight corruption and the organized theft of forest products, build new housing, and reach out to foreign investors, a strategy that paid dividends in Novgorod under Mikhail Prusak and Nizhny Novgorod under Nemtsov. But the challenges will be extreme as he faces budget deficits, declining output from local factories, growing

wage arrears, and poor infrastructure, particularly inadequate roads. Belykh has brought in young activists, such as Maria Gaidar (<http://m-gaidar.livejournal.com/>) as deputy governor responsible for social and health policies, who will have to work with the deeply entrenched local officials jealously guarding their power from outsiders and a relatively inert civil society. So far, the regional legislature has refused to confirm Gaidar in her position, citing her youthful inexperience. Other national leaders, such as Aleksandr Lebed, have faced difficulties in handling the job of governor, but Belykh has some experience, having served as a deputy governor in Perm, though that is a region that is much more progressive than Kirov.

Yabloko Fails to Gain Prominence

Yabloko, like SPS, was once a major force in the liberal movement, but lost its parliamentary representation in the 2003 elections and failed to create an alliance with SPS or cross the 7 percent barrier on its own to win representation in the 2007 Duma elections. Although the party name originally represented the three co-founders, the party is most closely identified with Grigory Yavlinsky. Members of SPS have often blamed Yavlinsky’s unwillingness to compromise for the failure of Russia’s liberals to unite in a single coherent organization, but Yabloko supporters have frequently listed their strong ideological differences with SPS in explaining why such a merger is impossible. In June 2008, after the party had suffered consecutive humiliating electoral defeats and seemed to be stuck in a downward spiral, Yavlinsky resigned and the party elected one of his allies, Sergei Mitrokhin, to replace him. In having one clear leader, Yabloko distinguished itself from the other liberal parties since Solidarity is led by a committee of 13 individuals, while *Pravoe delo* has three co-leaders.

Under Mitrokhin the party has been much less visible than it was under Yavlinsky. Like SPS, it seems to be concentrating on regional, rather than federal, politics, though it did seek to block Putin and Medvedev’s efforts to amend the constitution to extend the presidential term from four to six years at the end of 2008. Mitrokhin, a member of the Moscow city duma and the former head of the Moscow branch of the party, has focused largely on Moscow city politics and addresses issues of concern to city residents, such as Mayor Yury Luzhkov’s construction policies. Likewise, the regional branches of the party are mainly focused on addressing regional issues, according to a recent analysis in gazeta.ru.

Yabloko's decision to oppose the authorities has made it difficult for the party to operate, even in regional strongholds. Yabloko suffered a major defeat in February 2007, when St. Petersburg election officials disqualified the party from the city's legislative elections after ruling that more than 10 percent of the signatures the party had collected were invalid. Election officials often use this excuse to remove parties they do not like from elections. The three Yabloko members in the previous city legislature had voted against the appointment of Valentina Matvienko as governor and, according to Yabloko supporters, that was sufficient reason for the city authorities to target the party as undesirable.

Beyond its problems with the authorities, Yabloko's inability to work with other liberal groups continues to limit the party's ability to play a constructive role. For example, in December 2008 it excluded the head of its youth wing, Ilya Yashin, from the party ranks

because he had become one of the 13 leaders of the new Solidarity movement. Yashin went on to manage Nemtsov's campaign in Sochi. Yashin is one of the more charismatic and energetic opposition activists, as profiled in *Vedomosti* journalist Valerii Panyushkin's recent book *12 Who Do Not Agree (12 Nesoglasnykh)*, which sketches key moments in the life of a dozen prominent opposition leaders. Yashin relentlessly travels the country seeking to understand the conditions of its citizens.

Looking Forward

Whether leaders like Nemtsov and Belykh will be able to bring change to Russia from the bottom-up remains to be seen. Much will depend on what happens at the top. However, if an opening for reform does appear, perhaps because of a split in the elite, some of the opposition liberals may be able to put their hard-won experience in campaigning and governing to good use.

About the author

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Recommended Reading

- Kirill Benediktov, "Soyuz pravykh sil:" *kratkaya istoriya partii* [Union of Right Forces: A short history of the party], Moscow: Evropa, 2009.
- Valerii Panyushkin, *12 Nesoglasnykh*, Moscow: Zakharov, 2009.
- Elfe Siegl, "Do Russian Liberals Stand a Chance?" *Russian Analytical Digest*, no. 1, June 6, 2006.
- Andrew Wilson, "Does Russia Still Have an Opposition?" *Russian Analytical Digest*, no. 28, October 2, 2007.
- Nikolai Petrov, "Kremlin control v grass-roots modernization," www.opendemocracy.net, May 8, 2009.
- Nicklaus Laverty, "Limited Choices: Russian Opposition Parties and the 2007 Duma Election," *Demokratizatsiya* 16: 4, Fall 2008, pp. 363–381.